

the supported teen: transitioning to high school

Transition plans for students with special needs provide support for social and academic success while giving students an accurate picture of what to expect in high school.

Well-planned transitions from middle school to high school are essential for success of incoming regular education high school students. Smooth transitions to high school for special education students are even more critical to their success (Williamston, 2010).

Failure and drop-out rates can be high at the ninth grade level, achievement declines during the transition from middle to high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), and behavior problems as indicated by suspensions and expulsions increase significantly early-on in the ninth grade (Jerald, 2006). Therefore, school principals must plan for a seamless transition to high school for students with special needs.

The Texas Comprehensive Center recommends that schools develop a comprehensive transition plan district-wide (2011). This district plan must include the cooperation of staff from the middle school and the high school to be successful, and should focus on the four components of effective

transition: accurate and useful information, supporting social success, supporting academic success, and collaboration (Williamston, 2010).

1. Accurate and useful information. Providing students and families with accurate and useful information about high school can allay anxiety. While it's important to give middle school students an accurate picture of life in high school, staff should not make anxiety-provoking statements to students or parents.

I have found that in some cases parents are more anxious about their children making this transition than the child is, so any activities that assist to allay the anxiety of the parents will be beneficial. Other parents, due to work or other factors, will not be involved in the transition process at all, but teams should still actively encourage their participation. Regardless of the parental in-

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vestment in the transition, it's critical that there are processes in place to assist with the dissemination of information for transition.

Leadership teams could consider the following activities as examples:

- Schedule several orientation nights at the receiving high school for parents and incoming students to attend and learn more about the school. Consider scheduling at least one orientation session during the day for parents who work a night shift.

- Conduct tours of the high school campus for students and parents in the spring and fall.

- Provide incoming freshmen and their parents with accurate information about how to succeed in high school.

- Send email blasts with appropriate transition-related information.

- Have middle school students "shadow" an older student through their day at the high school.

- Have parents of high school students available to talk to parents of incoming middle school students about expectations.

2. Supporting social success. While middle school culture tends to focus on all students being the same, in high school there are increasing opportunities for students to express themselves and more opportunities for students to "fit in" to their particular social niche. As this change is occurring from middle school to high school culture, it may prove to be challenging for students. Supporting social success will help.

Teams could consider the following to support social development during this transition:

- Match incoming freshmen students to senior students as a buddy system to negotiate the campus during the first week.

- Have eighth grade students shadow a ninth grade student for a day.

- Create a tutorial or advisory period for ninth-graders only.

- Assign incoming students an adult mentor or advisor.

3. Supporting academic success. Above everything, the most important purpose of transition is to prepare

middle school students for the academic demands of high school. Middle school students need to attend high school with the academic skills to be successful. This begins with preparation in middle school.

Here are some ways that leadership teams can support academic success:

- Assign all freshmen to common core classes or a school-within-a-school model.



- Provide all freshmen a class on the culture of high school, to include such skills as note-taking, time management, study skills, participation in athletics, and career exploration.

- Identify students at risk for academic failure prior to the transition and provide them with additional academic supports.

- Closely monitor the academic success of the students during the first year of transition to high school and provide additional support at the first signs of academic failure.

- Have high standards for both academics and behavior for entering students.

- Provide additional tutoring or other interventions to students.

- Offer a summer orientation program to incoming freshmen to become familiar with the campus and understand high school culture.

- Begin a graduation plan and career options plan early in the freshman year.

- Monitor academic preparation of students from the middle school.

- Educate middle school teachers regarding the demands of high school.

4. Collaboration. It's important that middle school staff collaborates with high school staff to make student transitions successful. Whether formal or informal, this time allows staff to share information on students and programs and

better prepare students for high school life.

- Prepare a comprehensive transition plan between school sites district-wide.

- Develop a transition team between the feeder middle school and the high school.

- Provide staff time to collaborate.

- Facilitate site and program visits between the middle and high school staff.

- Invite high school staff to attend professional learning community meetings at the middle school.

Orientation for special education students

Special education students need a distinctive orientation to high school. Schedule matriculation meetings to prepare the way for incoming students with Individualized Education Programs. These meetings should be held for the middle school and high school special education staff, and be seen as a case conference for staff, as opposed to an IEP meeting for a parent. The intent is for the staff between the feeder and receiving school to openly share information that will assist in a successful transition.

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tion and academic future for the student. Participants can include teaching staff from the high school, the counselor, school psychologist, and administrators. However, you can include “high profile” parents when you have cases that need special handling.

The matriculation meetings should be held in the latter part of the last month of school and coordinated with the feeder and recipient school staff. The middle school case manager should bring the student’s teacher records to the meeting. The teacher should also prepare a summary form that documents the basic information regarding that student. At the meeting, the middle school staff would then review the caseload with the high school team so the team is ready to work with students when they appear on day one.

IEP information for high school staff

So that the team is best prepared to work with the student with a disability, the student’s annual and triennial IEPs should be completed prior to moving on to high school. For those IEPs that are not due prior to the transition, the team should seriously consider moving up these evaluations and have them completed prior to the transition. It is very difficult for high school staff to conduct an appropriate evaluation on a student new to the high school, having little or no prior background information on the student. High school staff members have found it effective to be invited to eighth grade triennial IEPs in the spring so that the student is “on their radar.”

For students who do not have an annual or triennial IEP, eighth grade case managers should, at the minimum, consider having an amendment in the spring to modify or adjust the IEP to reflect the upcoming transition to high school. Principals should consider the following activities:

- Make personal introductions to important staff members at the school including counselors, vice-principals, the school psychologist or homeroom teacher, and especially the student’s case manager. This ensures the student knows the staff members who are available to him or her if there are problems.

- Walk especially anxious students and

their parents through their daily schedules, taking along a campus map so that they know where all of their classes are on the first day and how to get to them.

- For school-phobic students, implement a schedule of gradual exposure to the

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campus: Start by driving by the school, then enter the parking lot, then progress to stepping on the campus until the student is able to tolerate longer periods of time on campus.

- Assign a case manager for all incoming freshmen, if possible. This person can serve as the point of contact for all the students. You may also consider “looping” the staff so that this same person works with the same students during all four years of their high school experience.

- Have specialized counseling appointments for incoming high school special education students and their parents.

Not a dog and pony show: Improving student outcomes

Transition is a process, and it needs to be supported by more than a “dog and pony show” put on by the high school staff at an assembly in the middle school. When tran-

sitions are carefully planned and implemented, we can improve the outcomes for incoming high school students. A transition plan that includes parents, middle school staff, high school staff and administration can ensure that ninth grade students are less likely to drop out, and more likely to succeed. ■

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